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ABSTRACT

Leaving school early has a dramatic impact on Hispanic girls, because Latinas face greater barriers than males when seeking high-wage jobs and opportunities in postsecondary education. This Digest examines how gender roles, families, schools, and friends influence Latinas in their education and career decisions, and outlines practical dropout prevention strategies for schools and families. Gender-role attitudes in U.S. society, schools, and Latino families contribute to girls' educational performance, and girls' gender attitudes may signal whether they will pursue stereotypical vocations and familial paths or seek higher education and careers. School factors that influence decisions to drop out of school include tracking into vocational or general education programs, sexual harassment and the refusal of schools to correct it, and the attitudes of peer groups in school. Some practical solutions are school programs that promote self-efficacy and high expectations, programs that improve academic performance at early ages and encourage career goals, teacher efforts to avoid and counter gender bias, the belief among school staff that all students can succeed, programs to help teen parents graduate and find work, Hispanic mother-daughter programs that raise aspirations, and programs that take into account the differences among Latinas of different generations and cultural groups. (Contains 20 references.) (SV)

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by Harriett D. Romo[1]

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Latina High School Leaving: Some Practical Solutions

by Harriett D. Romo[1]

Leaving school early has a dramatic impact on Hispanic girls, because Latinas face greater barriers than males when seeking high-wage jobs and opportunities in postsecondary education. Recent census figures demonstrate the serious problem of Latinas leaving school before graduation. In 1995, both African Americans and non-Hispanic Whites had a high school completion rate near 87%. Despite recent gains, Hispanics trailed behind, with a rate of only 57%. High school completion rates for Hispanic women aged 18 to 24 are slightly higher than rates for Hispanic men (Carter & Wilson, 1997). This Digest examines how gender roles, families, schools, and friends influence Latinas in their education and career decisions, and steps schools and society can take to help these girls feel accepted.

Gender Roles and School Leaving

Gender-role attitudes in U.S. society, schools, and Latino families contribute to girls' education performance. Stereotypes of Hispanic girls as submissive underachievers are often reinforced by family, school, and media (De Leon, 1996). According to Tinajero, Gonzales, and Dick (1991), Latina mothers exert powerful influences over their daughters' education and career choices. Even though they value education, mothers from low socioeconomic backgrounds, who are uncertain about the future and depressed about their own livelihood, may not talk to their daughters about pursuing postsecondary education or professional careers. As a result, even Latina students who are above-average achievers may think about leaving school.

Gender roles are reinforced by media as well as family members from the day a child is born. These roles are accentuated as the child becomes a teenager. Ortiz (1995) reported that working-class Mexican American females often experience conflicts among traditional roles of motherhood, family responsibilities, and academic success. Valenzuela (1993) found that equal male-female role attitudes among high school girls contribute positively to self-image, self-esteem, sex-role orientation, and achievement, encouraging girls to think of a broadened array of work, career, and family possibilities. A number of studies have discovered that gender attitudes signal whether girls will pursue stereotypical vocations and familial paths or seek higher education and careers (Anderson, 1996).

When Latinas do not see possibilities for doing well in school or pursuing postsecondary education or a career, they often leave school and start a family. Romo and Falbo (1996) suggest teen mothers do not have to leave school if their families are supportive and programs allow them to continue taking courses toward graduation.

A third of the 9-to-15-year-old girls surveyed by the Academy for Educational Development (1992) cited pregnancy or marriage as the reason for leaving school. The study reported that, compared with other groups, Latinas had the sharpest declines in self-esteem during adolescence and that a girl's role within her family was important to her overall self-esteem. A lower percentage (38%) of high school Latinas felt good about themselves within their families, compared with 59% in middle school and 79% at the elementary level. According to the study, 83% of Latina high school students disapproved of the homemaker role, but about a third of those disapproving believed they would eventually assume these roles. Latinas were less likely to find support at home or in school for high educational achievement than other young women in U.S. society (Hernandez, 1995). However, other studies suggest that bilingualism and a strong ethnic identity can overcome gender barriers and enhance school success (O'Halloran, 1995).

School Factors

Even when families encourage persistence, the poor performance of schools can pressure students into dropping out. Vocational education enrollments clearly show Latinas being steered into jobs with little career or income potential. In Texas, Latina high school students are frequently enrolled in cosmetology classes or tracked into noncollege preparatory general education programs. Few vocational programs encourage Latinas to enter nontraditional fields or offer them reasons to remain in school (Romo & Falbo, 1996).

Latina students may also leave school because of sexual harassment and the refusal of administrators to correct it. Sylvia Cedillo of the University of Texas Law School worked with the Stop Harassment in Public Schools Project (SHIPS) to eliminate sexual comments or jokes, sexist terms, sexual rumors, graffiti, leering, sexually graphic notes, and physical sexual harassment such as touching, grabbing, or pinching. Typically, sexual harassment begins in middle school, but many students report such behavior before the 7th grade. Competition and conflicts among "cliques" of girls can also result in harassment, affecting Latinas' attitudes toward school and their ability to learn (Merten, 1997). As a result of sexual harassment, students often stay home, cut class, or do not contribute. They may experience difficulty concentrating on school work or suffer lowered self-esteem and self-confidence (Texas Civil Rights Project, 1998).

Peer attitudes also contribute to lower education aspirations among Latinas. A major part of what students learn comes from friendships formed outside the classroom and the strategies of peers for coping with school (Steinberg, 1996; Eckert, 1989). Latinas who are part of peer groups that participate in and are accepted by the school do better in their classes and future jobs than students in peer groups that reject the school and feel rejected by it. According to Reyes, Gillock, and Kabus (1994), students feel that social support from peers deteriorates significantly by the end of the first year in high school. Latinas with close friends who are school oriented are more likely to graduate and consider attending college.

Some Practical Solutions

The support of family, schools, and peers is very important to Latinas in completing high school and taking nontra-

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ditional career paths (Hernandez, Vargas-Lew, & Martinez, 1994). School programs that promote self-efficacy, self-confidence, and high expectations are as important as programs that provide opportunities for academic and career success. Events on high school and college campuses that feature successful Latina women in nontraditional fields inspire Latinas to think about new career options. Academic Outreach, Upward Bound, Community of Scholars, and Bridge—programs designed to improve students' academic performances at early ages and help them set and work toward academic goals—have been found to counter academic barriers such as teachers or counselors who discourage Latinas from taking advanced classes. These programs also help Latinas maintain their goals for academic success while retaining ties to friends who may not be school oriented.

There are numerous examples of gender bias in our classrooms from preschool through graduate education (Sadker & Sadker, 1994), and faculty need to counter these biases. Teachers can connect with Latina students by making physical or eye contact, allowing Latinas ample time to answer questions, creating a sense of community and participation in the classroom, using examples in the classroom that are inclusive of Latinas, listening carefully and respectfully to students' questions and comments, and coaching students who seem reticent to speak.

Lucas, Henze, and Donato (1990) identified a number of school factors that promote Latina success. The most critical is a school staff that believes all students can succeed. Other key factors include valuing students' languages and cultures, holding high expectations, making education a priority, offering a variety of courses, providing sound counseling, involving parents, and providing staff training to help teachers serve Latinas more effectively.

The emphasis must be on keeping Latinas in school. Once a teenager drops out or starts a family, the barriers to graduation are huge. Given the difficulties faced by "reentry" teen mothers, it is not surprising that few Latina teen mothers complete or even begin a higher education program once they have left high school. Many large urban high schools offer special programs to help teen parents graduate, but many provide only basic and remedial level classes. Programs should help Latinas obtain enough education to find work in high-paying jobs and become self-sufficient. This means giving as much assistance as needed to meet education goals and offering training in nontraditional fields that pay high wages.

Hispanic mother-daughter programs have successfully targeted high-risk 6th-grade girls who come from families in which no member has graduated from college. Activities help girls and their mothers maintain interest in school and raise education and career aspirations. As a result, mothers have become better role models and more involved in their daughters' educations. These programs extend family networks and encourage university and professional women to serve as mentors in the community. In the University of Texas at El Paso Hispanic mother-daughter program, all 150 girls participating had remained in school through the 10th grade, had taken part in school activities, and were planning for college. An evaluation of the program also indicated mothers were playing active roles in their children's educations, mothers and daughters were becoming closer, and mothers were maintaining higher expectations for their daughters as well as other children (Romo & Falbo, 1996).

Zavella (1997) emphasized the importance of understanding differences among Latinas and moving beyond stereotypes. She urged paying more attention to generational differences and the varied histories of Latina groups and regional cultures. Whether or not a Latina is first generation (born outside the U.S.) or of subsequent generations born in the United States affects how "American" she feels. Zavella proposed a curriculum that includes comparisons among women from different cultural backgrounds who are similar in other ways such as generation or social class.

Latinas can achieve higher graduation rates if families and schools work together. For Latina students to feel appreciated and respected, teachers must consider home, community, school, classroom, and student factors when designing effective instructional practices (Scribner, 1995). Latinas who earn high school diplomas are more likely to continue in postsecondary education programs as well as earn higher paying jobs.

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